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SUBJECT: Mano River Union Summit Unites Presidents But Produces No Formal Agreements

REF: 06 Conakry 1711

¶1. (SBU) Summary. From April 27-30, Guinea hosted the Summit of Chiefs of State and Governments of the Mano River Union (MRU). The primary stated goals of the meeting were to consolidate peace, security, and stability in the MRU; resolve border issues; and revitalize the Secretariat of the MRU -- themes similar to the MRU conference in Conakry in November (reftel). President Lansana Conte received Presidents Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone, and Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d'Ivoire. Each country was also represented by high-level delegations of ministers, government officials, and civil society representatives. While there was discussion of the longstanding Yenga border issue, with ministerial representatives reporting that Guinea had agreed to withdraw its military forces, the governments did not release a final communique confirming this. Instead, prior to her departure, President Johnson-Sirleaf announced that each country will continue to work on the recommendations submitted during the summit to ensure strengthened relations among MRU members. End Summary.

High-Level Delegations Express Common Concerns

¶2. (SBU) On April 27-30, the Summit of Heads of State and Governments of the Mano River Union convened in Conakry. It is the second high-level meeting of MRU countries in Guinea in less than six months (reftel). President Kabbah of Sierra Leone arrived in Guinea on April 29, and President Sirleaf of Liberia arrived the morning of April 30. Although Cote d'Ivoire is not officially a member of the MRU, its delegation, led by President Gbagbo, was warmly welcomed by the MRU countries (Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia), and its representatives actively participated in all aspects of the meeting.

¶3. (SBU) During the first two days, ministers from the four participating countries convened the Seventeenth Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of the Mano River Union. They were joined by civil society representatives from each of the three MRU countries. The Council of Ministers was designated to prepare specific recommendations on ways to strengthen peace and security, resolve border issues, and promote socio-economic integration through the revitalization of the MRU Secretariat.

Conte Presides Over Opening Ceremony

¶4. (SBU) President Conte presided over the April 30 formal opening ceremony. Two hours after its scheduled starting time of 0930, Conte walked unassisted to the head table. Guinea's president sat attentively while Prime Minister Lansana Kouyate delivered remarks in Conte's name. Kouyate opened the speech by stating that this is a real moment of satisfaction for the people of Guinea, "being honored by the presence of these leaders just two months after the pain that our country has endured."

15. (SBU) For Conte, the Prime Minister thanked the nations of the MRU for their support and friendship, proof that "together we can transcend any problem." He extended a personal thanks to President Gbagbo for his concern with the MRU stating, "We can only safeguard the peace and security of the region if we do so with our friends in Cote d'Ivoire." Conte's message concluded with an additional note of appreciation for the Secretary General of the MRU and the international community that "has stood by Guinea and committed support for the integration of our nations." While the Prime Minister's own prepared remarks were made available (and sent to the Department via email), he did not present them.

16. (SBU) President Johnson-Sirleaf made the second (and final) opening presentation. She began by thanking Conte for the welcome reception and reiterating thanks to Gbagbo and extending an invitation for his team to participate in all deliberations. Sirleaf remarked, "The Mano River Union exists for the sole purpose of bringing together our people -- the same people, history, culture, traditions, and environment." She emphasized that none of the countries present could achieve its development objectives until all citizens are working together toward the same goals. Sirleaf invited all present "to dedicate themselves to move forward in peace and toward common development practices for the common good of our people." She endorsed the MRU Secretariat, confirming that the heads of state would adopt a working program to reactivate this institution. Sirleaf acknowledged the recommendations from the Council of Ministers and said that the heads of state would meet behind closed doors and take firm decisions on them.

No Final Document Presented

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17. (SBU) After Johnson-Sirleaf's presentation, the meeting was adjourned with the announcement that the summit would reconvene for the closing ceremony and the reading of the formal communique. The visiting heads of state were accompanied by high-level delegations from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire. Also in attendance were the majority of ministers from Guinea's new cabinet, representatives of the top military brass, President of the National Assembly Aboubacar Sompore, and civil society leaders, including several representatives from the Mano River Women for Peace Network.

18. (SBU) Approximately one hour after the opening remarks, protocol officers announced that there would be no formal closing ceremony. They told those gathered that the communique would be read on the evening news. To date, no formal statement has been released. Prior to her departure from Guinea on April 30, President Johnson-Sirleaf stated that the heads of state would return to their respective capitals and continue working together.

Hopeful Discussion, But No Agreement on Yenga

19. (SBU) Prior to the opening ceremony, an advisor at the Ministry of the Interior and Security told Poloff that, on April 29, Guinean and Sierra Leonean government and civil society representatives agreed on Guinea's withdrawal of its military troops from Lilema, a town near the Yenga border. This advisor said there was never a question that Yenga was a Sierra Leonean village. Guinea had just maintained its presence in order to protect the security of the region during the civil war, he maintained. The advisor confirmed his satisfaction that the Yenga issue "would be resolved and we can finally put it behind us." Others at the ceremony, including from the Mano River Women for Peace Network, told us that all interested parties had reached an agreement on Yenga. However, none of the heads of state made any public remarks specifically mentioning the Yenga border issue prior to the conclusion of the summit.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The Mano River Union Summit had high symbolic value, but there was little substance shared publicly. Most of the documents that were made available came from the Council of Ministers. (Note: These documents are being sent via email to the Department.) We are left to conclude that, in the absence of a formal statement, the chiefs of state did not reach a final agreement about concrete measures to consolidate peace, security, and stability in the MRU; resolve border issues; and revitalize the Secretariat of the MRU. Although he did not say a word (but managed to smoke two cigarettes and eat a kola nut during the 10-minute opening presentation), Lansana Conte appeared in reasonably good health. Conte's presence alone was significant as he has not participated in any MRU activities in years. Yet it was also clear that Guinea and its neighbors still have a long way to go before they develop concrete measures to begin setting and achieving common development goals. Perhaps a new, reinvigorated MRU Secretariat will provide a vehicle to facilitate this arduous process.

MCDONALD